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CH'AN NEWSLETTER

No. 33 November 1983

NO THOUGHT OF GAIN OR LOSS IS FREEDOM FROM SAMBARA

Lecture based on the The Sutra of Complete Enlightenment
Given November 6, 1983 by Master Sheng Yen

Ordinary people cannot conceive of the Buddha's wisdom. Even Arahats are unable to comprehend such wisdom. For an ordinary person to try to fathom what the Buddha knows would be like trying to light up Mt. Sumeru with fireflies. Ordinary people rely on the knowledge that they have acquired; thus they can only see the material world of forms. They cannot see beyond it. Their thinking is already separate from reality. Such activity leads nowhere; it will produce nothing - like the blossoming of imaginary flowers.

You may not be able to attain to the highest level right away, but you can get a small, subtle idea of Buddhahood. The Sutra of Complete Enlightenment speaks of the wisdom of a Buddha, not that of ordinary people. But it is as ordinary people that we begin. If we wanted to stay that way, there would be no need to practice. However, it is only when we hear of wisdom such as that of the Buddha's, that we realize we are just ordinary people; we realize that there are higher states to attain. This will help to encourage us in our practice.

The sutra tells us that even those who reach the Sravaka state still have not reached the state of the Buddha's wisdom. The Sravaka is one who is free of vexation and samsara; yet he is not willing to go back to the realm of suffering for any reason. Sravakas hope to attain or have attained to the higher worlds, much like the Western conception of heaven.

I once asked a friend this question: What was your reason for coming to this world? He said, "I don't know why I came to this world. There's certainly more suffering than pleasure here. So I couldn't have wanted to come here."

He continued, "I started living for my family, trying to find happiness. But I've been divorced three times. I tried hard each time, but my wife would get half my property and take the kids."

Why is it that all of you have come to this world? Why do you continue to live here? Is it because you wish to have a successful marriage or a comfortable family life? Two thousand years ago a great Chinese general, Ts'ao Ts'ao, wrote a poem after he had completed many successful battles. He wrote that life is like dew drops in the morning; the days of suffering outnumber the days of happiness. He was a great hero, a great success, yet he expressed these feelings. For all of us, in our family, in our work, in all our lives, is there more happiness or sadness? Whatever we take up and try to do will take hard work - if we genuinely want it to succeed. Life is a struggle for all of us. A baby struggles to walk. Few children like to study, but it is important for their future. These struggles, these burdens, have been with us since the moment of birth.

Thus I answered my friend's questions, "We have come to this world for two reasons. First, to pay back our debts. Next, to save for the future. It is these two reasons that cause all of our hardship."

My friend disagreed, however. He said, "I don't owe anybody anything. As a matter of fact, it's just the opposite of what you said - it's they (my wives) who have taken everything from me."

I said to him that it may be that you don't remember all of the debts that you have. I asked, "can you remember your dreams of three years ago?" My friend said that that would be impossible.

Perhaps you don't remember your dreams, but you must remember that life is just a dream. At death this dream ends and another will begin. How could you remember one dream from another dream? But you know that you had a dream last night, so you know of samsara.

We have debts from past lives and must save, so to speak, so that this debt will not grow into our next life. To this my friend said, "If this is a dream, then I don't have to do anything - it's all an illusion anyway." But I replied, "if you don't do something, you will regret it." So my friend concluded, "Then I must work hard till death comes. Life is too much suffering."

What are all these questions and answers about? The lives and suffering of ordinary people. The Sravakas are already free from this sort of life, but they still have no idea of the Buddha's wisdom. Let me give you an analogy to show how a Buddha's wisdom differs from that of others:

Three animals cross a river, an elephant, a horse, and a rabbit. When the elephant crosses, he knows how deep the river is because his feet are always on the bottom. The horse knows how deep it is close to the shore, but not at the middle. The rabbit doesn't

know the depth at anytime. But all three animals manage to cross the river. The rabbit represents the Hinayana Sravaka, the Horse represents the Mahayana Bodhisattva, and the elephant represents the Buddha. The Hinayana practitioner does not have an inkling of what has really happened. The Mahayana practitioner may have an inkling, but it is only the Buddha who really knows. All three have gone beyond the river - they have attained wisdom. So if even accomplished Hinayana practitioners cannot know the Buddha's wisdom, how much more difficult it will be for an ordinary person!

People generally look for knowledge and wisdom in books. In general this is not wrong, but the highest wisdom and even the deepest emotions cannot be expressed through words. Many instances show the failure of words. There are instances of children in Taiwan, separated for twenty or thirty years from parents in the mainland or lovers who are separated for months or years. When such people finally meet, there is little that they can say.

The thinking mind necessitates symbols - this mind cannot bring us to a very deep level. We can achieve material success through such mental processes, but they have their limitations. They will not bring us to the Buddha's wisdom.

The sutra tells us that he who has conceptions of samsara will never enter Buddha's great ocean. The mind of samsara has ideas of birth and death, gain and loss, and it is filled with vexations. When we hope to attain happiness and to be free from misfortune - this is the mind of samsara. This is similar to drinking salty ocean water when you are thirsty. The more you drink, the more thirsty you are. The more thirsty, the more you drink. Happiness and blessing are ambiguous. Of what are they composed? Social status, a good job, fame, a fine family? Ordinary people say that these are the criteria of a good life. But these things cannot be maintained forever. Like the dewdrops in the poem, they are very beautiful on the grass in the morning, but the sun will shine and they will evaporate. They are very temporary.

Thus those who have the mind of samsara will have two attitudes: that of seeking happiness and that of avoiding misfortune. Such attitudes are foolish, but they are natural for ordinary people. And perhaps if ordinary people did not have such attitudes, they would not want to live.

Seeking happiness is like a dog chasing its tail. He goes around and around, thinking that his tail is something apart from him. He can never get it. Avoiding misfortune is like a man walking in the sun who tries to avoid his shadow. He thinks the shadow is evil, and he runs from it; but the faster he runs, the faster the shadow follows. Such attitudes will only make you tired.

My friend then asked me, "What attitude should we have to help us face our fate?" It is like this, "Whatever things are happening, let them happen. We should not worry too much about those things

which have not yet happened - if they are beneficial, try to have them happen; if they are not, try to have them not happen. If you are sick, what can you do but call a doctor and try to get well? If you are not sick, you try to stay well, but you should not worry that you might get sick. If you are sick, don't complain or compare yourself with others. If you adopt this attitude in daily life, you will be happier.

Such an attitude is free from thoughts of gain or loss - it is already far from the samsara mind. Perhaps for us to actually live like this is another question. But this is the attitude of a Bodhisattva - to be unafraid of suffering. Bodhisattvas neither cause nor create suffering. Because they are not afraid of suffering, they will not suffer before suffering actually arises. When suffering does arise, the Bodhisattva will have no aversion to it. Thus there will be no real suffering. Fifteen years ago monks in Vietnam set fire to themselves to protest the political situation. One may question if this is acceptable, but these monks did not consider that this was death. There was pain, yes. But there was no suffering.

Not to have concepts of gain and loss, not to run to pleasure and to run away from pain, not to run towards a Buddhahood and away from samsara - this is the path of the Buddhas. Bodhisattvas are not afraid of suffering, and of birth and death, but Hinayana Sravakas are still afraid of such things. They do not truly understand the Buddha's wisdom.

Not to have an attitude of gain or loss, not to seek happiness or to avoid unhappiness is characteristic of a Buddha or a Bodhisattva. People ask me if I want money, new temples, recognition, etc. If these things become available, I won't reject them, but neither will I seek them. I will still take Korean Airlines despite the fact that the Soviets shot down one of their planes. I have been taking Korean Airlines for five years, and I have had no problems. When it is time for me to leave, then perhaps something might happen.

That which is, let it be. What will happen, let it happen. What has happened, we must accept. Do not worry too much about that which is yet to happen - we can try to prevent what is unfortunate, and try to make what is pleasant come to pass. This is the attitude of Ch'an and Mahayana Buddhism. With this attitude one is free from samsara.

NEWS ITEMS

Lectures by Master Sheng Yen

Rutgers University, Douglas Campus - Sunday, November 13, 1983. Department of Religion, Committee for Asian Studies, and the Meditation Club sponsored an all-day Beginning Meditation class. Over 50 students and five professors attended.

New School for Social Research - Wednesday, November 16, 1983. Rev. Bup An invited Shih-Fu. Shih-Fu spoke on "Ch'an and Non-discrimination."

Columbia University - Thursday, November 17, 1983. East Asian Language and Culture Dept in Kent Hall. Shih-Fu spoke on "Ch'an and Emptiness." Over 50 students and faculty attended.

Ch'an Center - Every Thursday, beginning December 8, 1983. Continuing lectures on Buddhist Philosophy. Topic is "The Awakening of Mahayana Faith," by Asvaghosha.

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Shih-Fu's book, Getting the Buddha Mind was reprinted in Taiwan. A thousand English copies were printed, and the book was translated into Chinese. Also it is reported that the English version has been used as a textbook in many introductory Buddhist classes.

The next two beginning meditation classes will each be on Saturday, December 10 and 17, 1983, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.

A seven-day retreat is scheduled for January 6 to 13, 1984. Anyone interested in attending is encouraged to register early.

There is an Intermediate Meditation Class on January 21, 1984, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.





The maintenance of our center and its activities depend upon contributions from members and friends. If you would like to help support us, any effort will be greatly appreciated. Those interested in offering time and labor may call the center at (212) 592-6593. Anyone who may wish to contribute financially, please make your check payable to the Institute of Chung-Hwa Buddhist Culture, and mail to the address given below. Your donation is tax-deductible.

Of course, we encourage everyone to visit and participate in our activities.

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